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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Situation of the Oromo in Ethiopia

Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the situation of human rights in Ethiopia's regional state of Oromia, after peaceful protests of the past months were met with excessive violence and increased, massive crackdown on the freedom of expression by the Ethiopian government.

The Oromia region is Ethiopia's largest federal state and comprises its single largest ethnic group, the Oromo, of which many live as farmers. Ethiopia's capital city Addis Abeba is situated in central Oromia. Although being the largest group in numbers, Oromo face constant discrimination and repression by the police and other authorities, which represent the small leading Tigray elite of Ethiopia. The government often treats Oromo to be anti-governmental and criminal as a rule. Arbitrary arrests without charge, baseless accusations, enforced confessions, threats, torture and other violations of human rights form a pattern of everyday oppression against Oromo.

In November 2015, Oromo students from universities and high schools started protesting peacefully against the government's "Addis Abeba Integrated Development Master Plan". The Master Plan intends to expand the capital city into the surrounding land, allegedly improving the infrastructure and economic possibilities in the region. The surrounding Oromo communities, however, fear they will be marginalized by this and limited in their rights even more. The government has not showed any interest to enter a dialogue with the Oromo on the issue or considered their interests, violating the Oromo's right of self-determination which is part of the Ethiopian constitution.

The Oromo, aware of years of on-going discrimination and land-grabbing, have opposed the "Master Plan" from the beginning as yet another means by the government to suppress the Oromo culture and diminish their political influence. Predating the current demonstrations, there have been protests against the Master Plan when it was first announced in spring 2014, leaving more than 40 people dead, as well as in March 2015.

The Master Plan being the straw that breaks the camel's neck, there are many other tensions that fuel the dissent of the Oromo people. Another important factor contributing to the uproar is the problem of land-grabbing. In Ethiopia, all land belongs to the government, and the oppressed minorities have faced brutal mass displacements in the past. The government sells the land for low costs to lure foreign investors into the country, sometimes even giving it away for free. Oromo farmers fear another wave of illegal and forceful evictions following the Master Plan, because it is aimed to suit the interests of the investors rather than those of the local people.

People who are displaced and evicted do not profit from such investments in any way; they are usually pushed into poverty and left with no remuneration for their losses. In the past decades, around 150,000 people have been robbed of their homes with little or no compensation.

The protests starting in November quickly erupted throughout Oromia, involving university students, high school students, farmers, artists and political leaders, exceeding previous protests by far. Frequent locations of demonstrations were, amongst many others: Adama University and Haramaya University and the cities of Ambo, Robe and Jimma. In the end of December, leading Oromo opposition figures and journalists were arrested, amongst others namely: Bekele Gerba, Deputy Chair of the oppositional *Oromo Federalist Congress* (OFC), Dejene Tafa, Vice Secretary of the OFC, Diribie Erga, resigned member of the Federal Parliament for OFC, as well as journalists like Getachew Shiferaw, Editor Chief of *Negere Ethiopia*, and Fikadu Mirkana of Oromo Radio and TV.

Until the first weeks of this year, at least 140 persons have been reported killed by governmental forces in the context of the Oromo protests. About 2,000 persons have been injured and an estimated number of 30,000 protesters are still imprisoned and at risk of being tortured for exercising their right of free speech.

In mid-January, a governmental party announced the Master Plan had been scrapped until a consensus would be reached. However, this raised little hope to the Oromo that their situation would improve in any way. The demonstrations continue still, despite the permanent brutal crackdown and excessive use of violence.

Human Rights Organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have raised deep concerns about the situation of Oromo protesters and criticized the government's unlawful methods.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls on the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Ethiopian government to:

- Conduct a thorough and independent investigation of human rights violations in the context of the Oromia protests, to sanction those responsible for disproportionate and excessive force and to provide effective remedies for the victims;
- Unconditionally release all peaceful protesters, journalists, opposition leaders and other political prisoners, and ensure they are not subjected to torture or other ill-treatment;
- Immediately cease forceful evictions of Oromo people and throughout Ethiopia;
- End all kinds of ethnical discrimination against the Oromo people end to ensure the right of the Oromo to freedom of political expression and self-determination, which are protected by the Ethiopian constitution and by international law.